

Ideawriting: Implementation and Pointers

Ideawriting (sometimes called brainwriting) is a widely applicable process for parallel idea generation. It supports both small and large groups in creating many useful items in a short amount of time.

Begin by forming workgroups of four or five persons and assigning each group to a separate table. Briefly explain the process to the participants: thinking, writing, exchanging worksheets, reading/writing, exchanging. Alert them that switching pages is usually the most awkward part of the ideawriting process for first-time participants. Explain that the workgroup members should view the center of the table as a common exchange point. After several minutes of writing, they will place their sheet in the center and pick up another's writing sheet (if one is available). As group members read others' thoughts, they should add more items on those pages. They also may ask questions in the margin. They should continue the process until the workgroup has reviewed all the individual worksheets.

Following the introduction, distribute writing paper, read the trigger question to the group, and make sure the members understand its meaning. Post the question on newsprint or prepare individual worksheets with it printed at the top. If you wish, you can place an extra sheet of paper in the center of the table. The extra worksheet helps the sharing process occur more smoothly.

When you are certain the group understands the question, ask them to write responses **SILENTLY**. Group members often want to talk -- on subject or off. If disruption is occurring, quietly tell the talkers that the process works best if each person in the room has a chance to think and write in silence. Also, tell them there will be a chance to talk shortly.

Monitor the progress of the group, prompting them if necessary, to exchange pages and to continue reading what others have produced. Close the writing-reading cycle when all have had the opportunity to examine and react to the others' worksheets.

Occasionally, with a large gathering and when there is time, the total group may benefit from additional reading and writing. Before discussing any of the responses, pass complete sets of pages from one small group to another. Continue with another exchange or two. This additional idea sharing helps enhance participants' perspectives and raise important issues. Return the worksheets to the original group.

It is possible to collect all the individual pages and assign one or two people to prepare a combined list. However, it is usually helpful to continue the session by having workgroup members clarify specific statements and create the combined list(s) of answers.

After the group members have resolved each others' concerns, they may use a combining or screening process. There are several options.

- + Cluster the individual items into topic areas. After reading over several pages of ideas, group members can usually pull out major themes. Label individual ideas with theme names or create new lists for each theme.
- + Combine and edit free-form responses into a consistent format. For example, you may wish to phrase all statements as opportunities, or you may want all verb forms to be similar.
- + Create new statements that capture multiple wordings of the same idea. If this editing task is difficult, keep the ideas as separate statements.
- + Ask each participant to flag important points, perhaps with an asterisk directly on the worksheet. After discussing the points, the small group can collectively agree upon a final list.

In choosing one of these options, you can shape the form of the final output to make it more useful. The choice should be consistent with the purpose of the session and the needs of the group.